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Brent Greene

University of Melbourne, brentfcgreene@gmail.com

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Anti-aestheticizing Australian Landscape: Compounding Narratives within Pictures

Brent Greene (University of Melbourne)

When Australia was colonised and settled during the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, visual artists, poets, writers and architects applied *landscape* as a framework to take possession of the continent. Within their paintings, words, novels and designs, the narratives of colonial Australia were established—chronicles that refer to men and women of Europe building settlements within a spatial environment culturally and ecologically dissimilar to their homelands. The landscape *constructions* of John Glover and Hans Heysen are two examples of this approach; colonisation devices that intentionally (or inadvertently) homogenised Australian landscape through picture making (Auerbach 47–8).

Appropriating landscape in this manner transcends the visual and is fraught with theoretical and cultural difficulties. When space is conceptualised through singular perspectives, populist narratives oft take precedence over *other* landscape frameworks; in many instances, Australia's nation-building narrative, as documented in colonial imagery, is given priority over lesser-known yet equally significant landscape histories, such as Indigenous dispossession and genocide.

The following creative works aspire to construct landscapes that carry multiple, rather than singular, narratives as a means to explore Australia's extensive landscape tradition. With the benefit of hindsight, the appropriated imagery of Glover and Heysen combines *hybrid frameworks* of Australian landscape at the time of colonisation and federation; through these pictures neither the colonial nor Indigenous narrative is given precedent. Alternatively, numerous stories are overlaid as a method to communicate past and present entanglements within Australian space.



Figure 1. *Occupation 1* (Greene 2015)

In *Occupation 1*, the composition draws upon landscape theory that discusses practices of Nazi occupation in Europe through the 1930s and 40s. When the regime moved into occupied territories such as Poland, it reconfigured landscape through the Nazi's *Landschaft* aesthetic and ecological ideals; in many instances, this process involved landscape dispossession concurrent to major reconstructions of endemic ecologies to those of a German provenance.

Upon Glover's *Natives on the Ouse River, Van Diemen's Land* (1838), a swastika is inserted as a framework to discuss Tasmanian landscape at the time of colonisation. It provides a powerful motif to reflect upon the processes of genocide and ethnocide

knowingly afflicted upon Indigenous Australians by some Europeans at this time (Clements; Markus 67; Moses 101–02). During this era the Indigenous population endured significant losses of up to 96 percent across Australia and Tasmania as British colonisation practices spread throughout the continent (Clements; Harris).



Figure 2. *Occupation 2* (Greene 2015)

In Glover's *Moulting Lagoon and Great Oyster Bay, from Pine Hill* (c. 1838), the artist depicts an agricultural scene along the shorelines of Great Oyster Bay in eastern Tasmania. Within the image, a singular pastoralist stands with a dog upon Pine Hill. From this vantage point the figure looks over a herd of sheep grazing upon a landscape that appears empty of other people. However, little more than ten years before, this landscape, as with others, was a site of the Black War, a conflict between colonists and Aborigines that saw many tribes murdered or forcibly removed from Tasmania. Here at Oyster Bay, there are numerous accounts of what might be considered genocide taking place (Clements; Harris).

Within this collage, the romanticised sky of the original composition is removed and the landscape is divided along the horizon line. The elements of the land, such as topography and fluvial systems, are elevated off the page as a means to further enhance this division. The atmosphere, having been depicted by Glover as ethereal and dynamic, is replaced by a hue and technique that impart concepts of loss and stillness; now russet in colour, the sky ceases to be romantic and, instead, the alternative shade makes reference to the blood spilt by both cultures during this contentious moment in Australian colonisation.

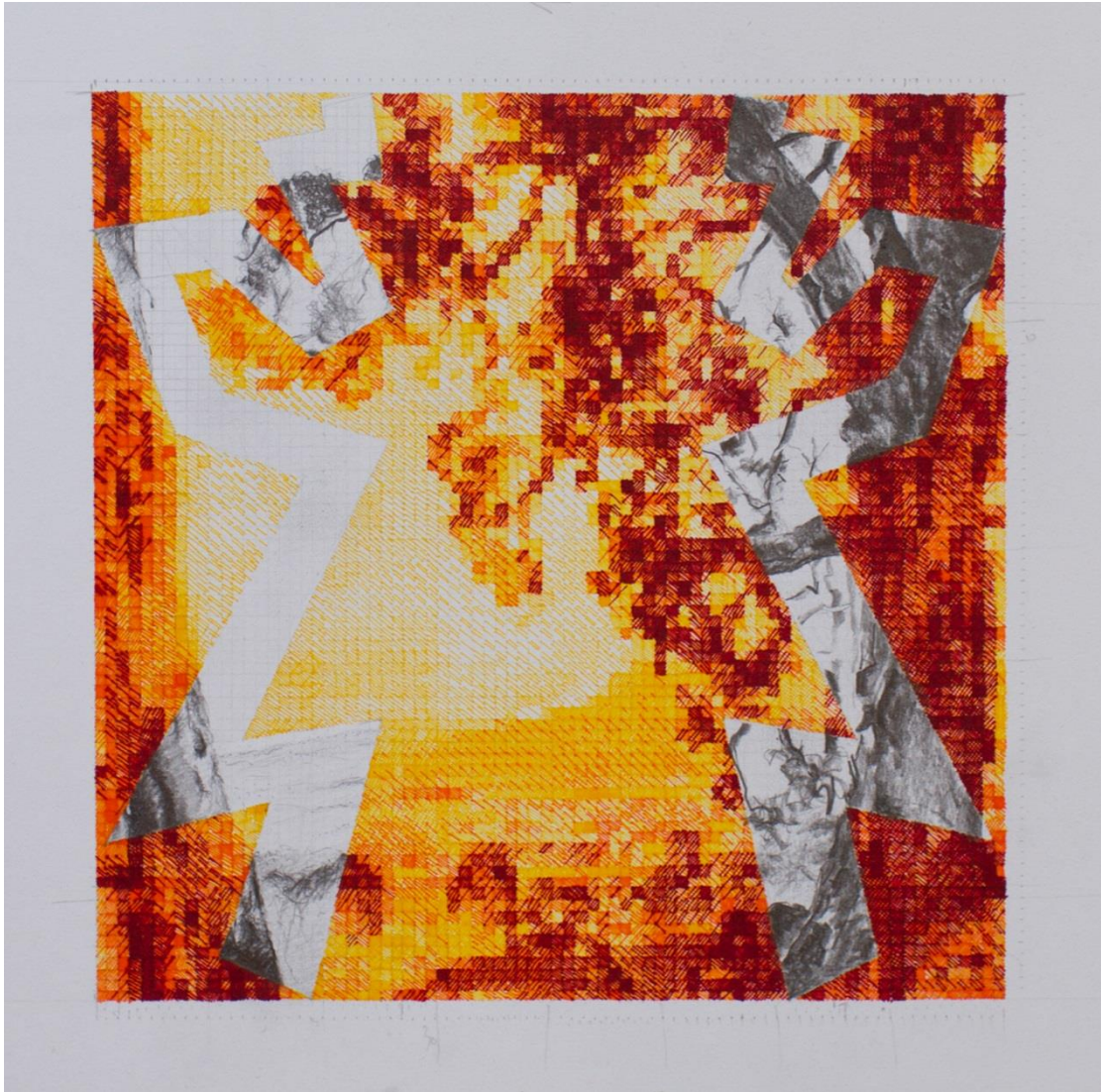


Figure 3. *Darkness into the Light* (Greene 2015)

On the 1st of January 1901, Australia went through the process of federation whereby six British colonies came together in Melbourne to form the Commonwealth of Australia. This development inspired multiple iconic images symbolic of the newly unified Australian nation. Hans Heysen's *Drover into the Light* (1914–21) is a considered one such example (Lock-Weir). Omitted, however, from federation processes were the voices of Indigenous Australians who remain, to this day, noticeably absent in the Australian constitution.

Inserted into Heysen's landscape is the floorplan of the Gallery of First Australians at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. This design, appropriated from

architect Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, provides an alternative framework through which to conceptualise this iconic federation imagery. Here a supplementary gallery floorplan is inserted and reversed to frame the landscape and establish Indigenous presence in what is perceived to be a romanticised pastoral scene. In addition to celebrating the importance of agriculture in the nation's economic and cultural development, this composition acts as a reminder that Australian landscape, having been actively managed through Indigenous land practices for tens of thousands of years, set the foundation for Australia's successful pastoral economy through the 19th and 20th centuries. Furthermore, the composition endeavours to add voice to the current political discussion of Indigenous recognition in the constitution by demonstrating Australian landscape as a shared space at the time of Federation.

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Brent Greene is a designer and researcher of urban landscapes. He is currently undertaking a PhD in landscape architecture at the University of Melbourne. His work investigates how spontaneous urban conditions, such as novel ecologies, are understood through design and cultural frameworks in Melbourne and Australia.